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MDD-4
Stagnant Vaupés.

May 24, 1964.
Bogotá.

Mr. Richard H. Nolte,
Institute of Current World Affairs,
366, Madison Avenue,
New York 17, New York.

Dear Mr. Nolte,

"When I consider the excessively small amount of labour required in this country to convert the virgin forest into green meadows and fertile plantations, I almost long to come over with half-a-dozen friends, disposed to work, and to enjoy the country, and show the inhabitants how soon an earthly paradise might be created, which they had never even conceived capable of existing."

"...I almost long..."

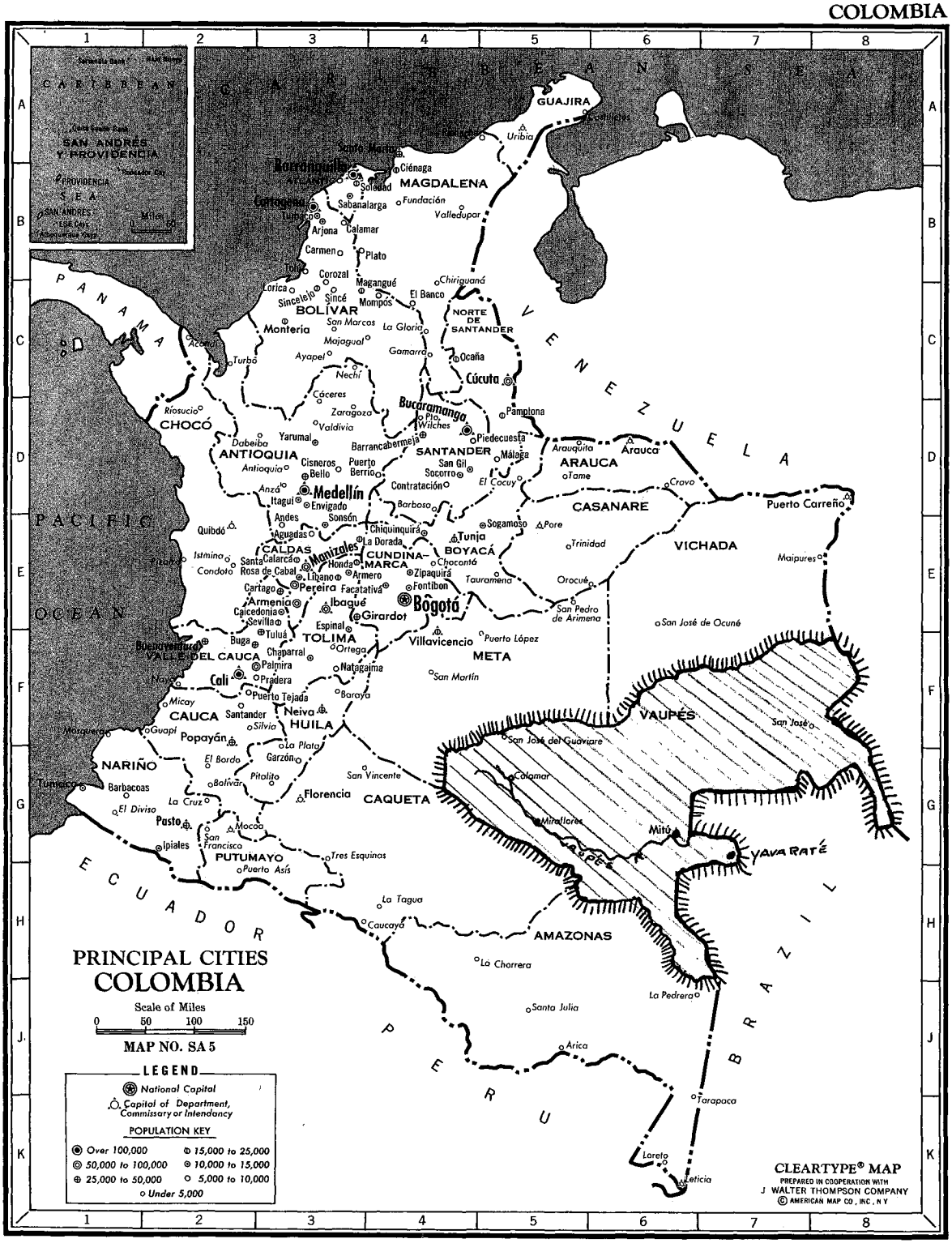
A.R.Wallace: 'A Narrative of Travels on the Amazon and Rio Negro.' 1853.

"Rio misterioso", as it is luxuriously called: the Vaupés is the least known of all Colombia's National Territories. It has been extensively explored, but few of those who went there wrote books, and most of these are narcissistic: "I thought in all seriousness of uniting myself for ever to this beautiful savage, whom I would be unable to present in society. Yes, I thought too of abandoning then for ever my distant paternal hearth, and civilisation itself."* Their burden is the dark beauty of the jungle that destroys, and the sufferings of the author. "Hay mucho suffrimiento en el río — There is much suffering on the river" is still the conviction of the white traders and officials of Mitú, the Territory's squalid capital. It is a mistake one does not make in one's own country: the assumption that those who live there know something about it.

Official information is as scant: the latest map does not mention one of the largest tribes; the best survey of the country — the 1958 'Estudio' of Padre Lebret and his team — hardly mentions the Vaupés at all. It is not mapped as a 'zona de indígenas', and in the section on roads it is merely labelled in passing 'zona de grandes costos de construcción'. The map of migrations inside the country leaves it untouched. The census is useless. The Vaupés is nobody's business.

* He did, but she was conveniently drowned later in the book.

COLOMBIA


CARIBBEAN SEA
SAN ANDRES Y PROVIDENCIA
PROVIDENCIA
SAN ANDRES
GUAJIRA
Riohacha
Uribia
Santa Marta
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Ciénaga
Soledad
MAGDALENA
Cartagena
Turbaco
Sabanalarga
Fundación
Valledupar
Arjona
Calamar
Carmen
Plato
Tolú
Corozal
Corica
Sincelejo
Sincé
Magangué
Mompós
El Banco
Chiriguaná
BOLIVAR
NORTE DE SANTANDER
Montería
San Marcos
La Gloria
Majagual
Gamarra
Ocaña
Ayapel
Nechí
Cúcuta
Cáceres
Zaragoza
Bucaramanga
Pto. Wilches
Pamplona
Riosucio
CHOCÓ
Valdivia
Dabeiba
Yarumal
Barrancabermeja
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ANTIOQUIA
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Cisneros
Bello
Puerto Berrío
SANTANDER
San Gil
Socorro
Málaga
Arauquita
Arauca
ARAUCA
Tame
El Cocuy
Cravo
Anzá
Medellín
Itagüí
Envigado
Contratación
Barbosa
CASANARE
Puerto Carreño
PACIFIC OCEAN
Andes
Sonsón
Quibdó
Aguadas
Chiquinquirá
La Dorada
Sogamoso
Pore
Tunja
Trinidad
VICHADA
Maipures
Istmina
Santa Rosa de Cabal
Calarcá
Manizales
Honda
CALDAS
CUNDINA-MARCA
BOYACÁ
Chocontá
Condoto
Líbano
Armero
Zipaquirá
Tauramena
Orocué
Pereira
Facatativá
Fontibon
Cartago
Armenia
Ibagué
Bogotá
San Pedro de Arimena
Caicedonia
Sevilla
Girardot
San José de Ocuné
Tuluá
Espinal
Villavicencio
Puerto López
Buenaventura
Buga
Chaparral
Ortega
TOLIMA
META
VALLE DEL CAUCA
Palmira
Natagaima
Cali
Pradera
San Martín
Puerto Tejada
Baraya
Micay
Neiva
VAUPÉS
Santander
HUILA
CAUCA
Silvia
San José del Guaviare
Guapi
Popayán
La Plata
NARIÑO
El Bordo
Garzón
Calamar
Barbacoas
Bolívar
Pitalito
San Vincente
Florencia
CAQUETA
El Diviso
La Cruz
Miraflores
Mitú
YAVARATÉ
Pasto
Mocoa
San Francisco
Ipiales
PUTUMAYO
Tres Esquinas
Puerto Asís
ECUADOR
La Tagua
Caucayá
AMAZONAS
La Chorrera
La Pedrera
Santa Julia
Arica
Tarapaca
Loreto
Leticia
PERU
BRAZIL
VENEZUELA
PRINCIPAL CITIES
COLOMBIA
Scale of Miles
0 50 100 150
MAP NO. SA 5
LEGEND
National Capital
Capitol of Department, Commissary or Intendancy
POPULATION KEY
Over 100,000
50,000 to 100,000
25,000 to 50,000
Under 5,000
15,000 to 25,000
10,000 to 15,000
5,000 to 10,000
CLEARTYPE® MAP
PREPARED IN COOPERATION WITH
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The area was crossed in the early feats of endurance of Hernán Pérez de Quesada and Philip von Hutten, the accounts of which record little but endurance. In 1784 a Portuguese tried to found a mission at Yabaraté, on the present border between Colombia and Brazil, but it failed to take root. The first traveller to leave a detailed description was Alfred Russell Wallace, later Darwin's collaborator, who went after the rumour of "a white species of the celebrated umbrella-chatterer". He found Brazilians moving west:

"Many of the worst characters in the Rio Negro", he noted, "come to trade in this river (the Vaupés) , and force the Indians, by threats of shooting them, into their canoes, and sometimes do not even scruple to carry their threats into execution, by being here quite out of reach of the Law, which still struggles for existence in the Rio Negro. ...Señhor L. had been requested by two parties, one the Delgarde de Policia, to furnish them each with an Indian girl."

They sold them down the river. Rafael Reyes, first modern explorer of the Putumayo and later President of Colombia, claimed to have suppressed the same Brazilian traffic there. The Indians sold prisoners from other tribes willingly enough. Even the small literature of this region presents in miniature all the arguments used in the great African trade: the Indians had slaves before the traders came, they co-operate and profit, the slavers save prisoners from being eaten. Wallace, who was there in 1851, estimated that £1,000 worth of Brazilian goods went up the river every year; the return was in farinha, a manioc flour made only for trade with the whites, baskets and other native work, and slaves. Slavery was then still legal in Brazil. Thus Indians far up river , though they had never seen a white man, were familiar, from the extensive native trade, with axes, machetes, knives, shirts, trousers, and even guns. These easily-acquired externals have since disguised the remoteness of these peoples.

These first uneasy relations were with Brazilians. The Colombians arrived in the early years of this century, the years of the rubber boom. What happened in the Vaupés then is not known for certain. I could find no old men there. The author quoted above, who united himself with the beautiful savage, asserts that there were prostitutes and rum in Mitú. There still are.* But through the investigations of Hardenburg and Sir Roger Casement

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*"They come here to dance and drink whiskey, and they bathe five times a day." — a local informant.

it is known what happened in the Putumayo, a similar stretch of rubber jungle. There the Peruvian company of Arana Brothers bought out or drove out their Colombian competitors — the Putumayo is Colombian territory, but the early Colombian rubber seekers were fatally dependent on the above Peruvian suppliers — and made a profit of more than a million pounds sterling in ten years. Casement estimated that their methods with the Indians cost forty thousand lives. This figure does not seem too high. Before, it was said "where a stone falls,it will fall on the head of an Indian". Sir Edward Grey, then Foreign Secretary, called Casement's report "the most horrible reading that had ever come before him!"* It seems too that the production of the Arana company fell not because it had exhausted the trees, nor because the price began to drop, but because it had used up too many Indians.

Colombians have since insisted on the Peruvian origin of these atrocities. But in his short list of "the worst criminals of the Putumayo" Casement included three Colombians, one of them an ex-magistrate. Colombian caucheros in other regions used the verb 'conquistar' to describe their activities, and certainly looked possesively on 'their' Indians. As Casement wrote, "The fate of the Indian, ...the short-sighted policy that ends in working him to death and denuding whole areas of their entire population, is only what has been the settled custom and practice of well-nigh four hundred years of Iberian occupation of that part of the world. " Rubber is not as romantic as gold and there were no 'encomiendas' to follow, so these men, who accomplished extraordinary journeys and who were sometimes brave as well as brutal, have not left their names behind.

Nevertheless, the Vaupés probably escaped lightly. The Casa Arana was an exceptionally ruthless organization: one of its agents was as shameless as to claim "£898,934 - 5 -7d" for "the flight of Indians instigated by Colombian authorities and the expenses of of commisions for hunting the Indians ." It operated with Peruvian military assistance. The Putumayo was an area of disputed jurisdiction, which the Vaupés was not: fifty years after Wallace, the Law may have struggled a little further up the Rio Negro. The Vaupés did not produce so much rubber.

Moreover, as one of Casement's witnesses put it, "The Indians were killed for not working rubber — for running away in order to escape from their work. Some may like to work rubber, but others do not, and these latter are not asked if they want to work rubber, but are chased and killed." Some may like to work rubber — the Vaupés Indians work it willingly

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*Opinion later revised in the light of the 'Diaries'?

enough now, and they were then more accustomed to dealing with white men. The tribes of the Colombian jungle do vary in the white categories of ability , ambition,and intelligence, and some of those of the Vaupés are most like us. It is not necessary, it is not possible, to assume that Colombians are naturally kinder to Indians than Peruvians; there are two myths recorded of the Vaupés, that explain the creation of one of the nastier species of ant and of the sinister rubber tree: both have their origin in the rape of an Indian girl by a white man.

Since then very little has happened. Rubber has declined. The successful corners made in the Amazon market in 1905 and 1910 gave the plantations of Malaya the impulse they had previously lacked — as early as 1876 Wickham had returned to Kew Gardens with the safe number of seventy thousand seeds. In 1905-6, 99.7per cent of the world's rubber was wild Amazonian; in 1922, 6.9 per cent. Attempts were made to plant in Colombia and in Brazil, but capital was not to be had, the wild distracted the workers and infected the planted trees.

The Vaupés has found nothing else. In Mitú, those who are not officials are most likely to be caucheros: "Sí, señor, soy cauchero." — they stiffen with a sort of regimental pride. There are fewer and fewer trees, further and further away. Equipment and methods have not changed since the nineteenth century. It has even got worse: a solidly -built trolley, and a noble boat the size of a whaler that used to go the rounds of the rubber stations rowed by eighteen men, lie disused in the town. Some old nostalgic keeps the boat neat and painted, but it is not used. The caucheros equip on credit from the stores, whose prices are consequently high. Awhite is paid three hundred pesos — thirty dollars — for a 'bulto' of fifty kilos of rubber, and an Indian, usually sub-contracted, gets a hundred. The highest estimate of an Indian's earnings for a year from rubber — and there is very little else to earn money by — was five hundred pesos. This is probably exceptional: the Casa Arana's quota per man was only two hundred kilos. Plans exist to try planting again, as Colombia now imports rubber. No one in Vaupés had heard of this belated initiative.

Rubber has become a poor subsistence thing, and the Missions have arrived. The first Mission to establish itself was founded on the Brazilian edge of the Territory , partly through suspicion of Brazil, a little over fifty years ago. Its fathers visited the main river from time to time. There were no missions on the Vaupés proper until 1949. But the culture of the river is now a mission culture.

The only signs of modernity in these missions are wireless sets, outboard-motors and generators. They receive about one third of their income from the Colombian government, the rest coming from their own resources — in the case of these missions scanty — and the tithe the Indians pay, mostly in kind. Unlike the Jesuits in Paraguay, whose profits were legendary, they can have no ulterior motive. The most imposing institutions of the Vaupés do rest on faith alone.

They sadden at first. Hymns and catechisms are sung to a different rhythm, sometimes the European origin is recognizable, but slowed and surely saddened, a weary chant without pauses. I heared a catechism that went

Question: "Who made the Announcement to the Virgin Mary?"
Answer, rising louder as the forgetful remembered:
"The Archangel Gabriel"
Question: "And where did he come from?"
Answer: "The sky"
Question: "And where did he land?"
Answer: "Palestine"

The churches emulate other churches in jungle materials, the images are Bogotá plaster. There are incessant prayers, rapidly muttered but in series never-ending. The Paraguay Jesuits were attacked "for spending more time teaching prayers and doctrine than useful arts". It was my impression in the missions of the Vaupés that more physical effort went into chanting and genuflecting than into any other activity. The Mass-bells were always ringing, an impatient spiritual bicycle forcing its way through a herd of cattle.

The missions are all full of children. You cannot look at the girls without thinking of sewing-machines — their clothes the timeless mission style. There were a number of girls, about twelve or thirteen years old, with no hair.: "Those are the ones who run away; we cut their hair off to punish them." How cruel.

How cruel? With their daily tasks, their little responsibilities, their simple lessons, they all seemed happy enough, even without any hair.

The priests and the nuns were the best people I met on the river; here in Colombia a priest or a nun is a more natural thing to be. The rest of the whites were not impressive. Wallace again, a nineteenth century sentence that still holds:

"The life of a river trader admits of little enjoyment to a man who has no intellectual resources; it is not therefore to be wondered at that the greater part of these men are more or less addicted to intoxication."

The missions, it is alleged, destroy without understanding. But the mission at Mitú had a conscientiously-kept museum, and one curious and knowledgeable priest. The mission does not destroy everything. Contact cannot be avoided. Alas, the fathers have outlawed feather-headdresses in Vaupés. But there were no missionaries where the Arana Brothers were exploiting the Putumayo. The missions are the real law and order of the Territory: those who do not like all they do must think of what they prevent being done.

Their teaching is no worse than the rest of Colombian Catholic primary education. Those who emerge from it are Catholics who can read and write Spanish, Colombians. To their certain advantage they are not Seventh Day Adventists.

Ultimately, the sadness of the missions is that there is nowhere to go afterwards. Very few Indians ever leave the territory. The mission maidens marry and go out to some hut. The mission leads nowhere on this earth. It is not parasitic, but what it can do is circumscribed by what can be done in the region. That is, not much.

Of the Indians outside the missions I have some acquaintance with the Cubeos and the Makus.

The first, "the first people" as the name means, used to say that they were as numerous as the sands of the river. That could not be said now. But they are open, hospitable, and enterprising. "Tenemos todo aquí — We have everything we need" was their frequent boast of self-sufficiency. Except, as the Brazilians add, what we haven't got. They grow manioc, they trap fish, sometimes and in some places they have pineapples, lemons, peppers mangoes and other jungle fruit. They hunt with shot-gun or blow-pipe.* They tap rubber to earn money to buy guns and outboard-motors, though for these last they never seem to have any petrol. They trade their food-surplus for articles made by the Toucano Indians, a traditional division of labour and a trade carried on over great distances. Of the list of sixty-five things of native manufacture seen by Wallace, I counted in my shorter stay forty-six. Those that have disappeared are weapons of war — the district is now peaceful, those that superior white goods have replaced — one should not grieve too much for the stone axe, and most articles of ceremonial. The fine funeral masks, representing the forty-five creatures of the world and the sun and moon, which used to grieve for the dead man, are now worn at some lighthearted mission festivals. They are degenerating: sold for thirty pesos

*The shot-gun seems to be supplanting the blow-pipe. Their price for most Indians — not all can make pipes — may be about the same, but the blow-pipe is cheaper to use and in good hands more efficient, as it does not frighten the living away. But it is cumbersome, and carries no 'status'.

Cubeo Indian Making Blow-pipe Darts

where they are made, they sell for as much as two thousand in Bogotá. Much of this loss in ceremonial dress and religious objects has occured since the 1940 investigation printed in the Handbook of South-American Indians. Missions.

"We must", writes Colombias foremost Indianist,"stop studying the Indian as an ethnographic specimen, a museum piece, and think of him as a man, above all as a Colombian, possessing the same rights as other Colombians. That is, we must give him the legal protection he has a right to, and respect his language, his customs,and his traditions."

This well-meaning sentence conceals a contraction. Some customs it would have been hard to respect and at the same time to consider those who practised them equal Colombians: Cubeo women ate parts of the enemies their husbands killed; the Toucanos used to roast, ferment,and respectfully drink the dead. There is no Indian protection service in Colombia comparable with that of Brazil, and no official decisions have been made on which customs and traditions are to be respected. Cubeos and Toucanos have not suffered much: strong-minded tribes, they have not lost their self-respect with the end of their more outlandish customs. In them can be seen the loss and the gain, and the loss is less sad for a sense they give of having made their own decision. Indian rights must include the right to discard customs; they cannot be made a living memorial of the objective awfulness of white-native contact in South America. It is better, like the Cubeos and Toucanos to forget. They are not sad peoples, nor are they the problem. There are some problem whites, and there are the Makus.

"Los Maku no son gente — the Maku are not people at all." Such is the opinion of Cubeos and Toucanos. They are of a distinct physical type, and their language is not like the others in the region. Sixteenth-century missionaries in the Colombian Amazon found 'Maco', 'Macusa', the general native word for slave: the Indians fled the Spanish intruders because they did not want to be 'Macos'. Wallace reported that

"All the other tribes of Indians catch them and keep them as slaves, and in most villages you will see some of them. They are distinguished at once...by being rather lanky and ill-formed in the limbs."

Seeing only the backs of the heads of a crowd attending church, I could count the Makus present by the shape of the head.

They are still exploited by the other tribes. They are not interested in the sympathy and limited protection that the missions offer them , seeing that as a mere change of masters. They will not learn Spanish — some of them know another native language and, when necessary, communicate with the whites through an interpreter. They

are not liked, and they are hard to like. They are certainly the most exasperating company I have ever kept. Their sad history has made them excellent prevaricators and marvellous liars, and they keep a mental distance and privacy, emphasized by their extraordinary language, that is a constant strain.

"They are always apt to affirm", wrote Wallace, "that which they see you wish to believe, and, when they do not at all comprehend the question, will unhesitatingly answer 'Yes'."

This habit persists among the Makus. They sometimes sighed as if I was wasting their time. I was. They are not interested in getting any more from whites than what they have already got — guns, clothes, cooking-pots, and very little else. Unlike the others, they showed no curiosity, which does not flatter a traveller. After believing their 'Yes' in several frustrating cases that turned out to be decidedly 'No', I dismissed more atrocious alternatives to revenge myself by writing that I hoped they would die out, which they showed every sign of doing. (The motive of many old atrocities must have been heat and exasperation as much as 'brutality'.) I later learnt that among some groups this was their deliberate intention: "We are a race that ought not to live." No one has gained their confidence or given them confidence yet; very few have tried.

This river has changed little in the hundred-and-ten years since Wallace's search for the umbrella-chatterer, and what has changed it most has been the antique agency of the mission. Without other intrusions it will stagnate again.

Nobody knows what the land is like: the jungle vegetation varies surprisingly, some clearings have turned out to be fertile, others poor. The heavy rains rapidly erode them. Some old-established whites have,with great devotion, shown around their houses, with the help of 'their' Indians, what can be grown. One said he had land for fifty head of cattle, if it was worth his while; it was worth his while to keep seven. An attempt may be made to plant rubber; men with the necessary skills exist. There is little hope of exploiting the timber. I see no way, even with the assistance of half-a-dozen friends, of showing the inhabitants how an earthly paradise might be created.

Still, "Tenemos todo aquí." There is tuberculosis and bad water, and they have no drugs.* There are seasonal shortages. But these Colombians do not starve: they live better than the poor of Bogotá.

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*The most serious charge against the missions is that they have brought these ills on the Indians by changing their settlement pattern.

I met a store-keeper in Mitú who was reading 'Paradise Lost'. He said he did not like poetry but wanted to get a general idea of the world.

Yours sincerely,

Malcolm Deas.

Malcolm Deas.

Forest - Vaupés

Received in New York June 1, 1964.